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COVER STORY

Gateway to green

Regional initiatives and their business partners — including garden centers — are helping St. Louis citizens rediscover nature in their neighborhoods.

Jolene Hansen



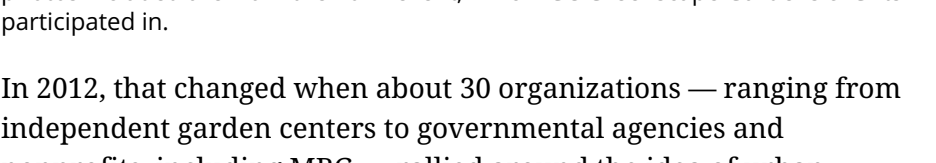
ALL PHOTOS ON THIS PAGE COURTESY OF CATHERINE WERNER

The desire to connect with nature through plants and wildlife is influencing the buying habits of generations of independent garden center customers. Habitat gardening, biodiversity and even pollinator plants have gone from fringe trends to integral parts of mainstream consumers' identities as stewards of their natural worlds. Independent garden centers are uniquely positioned to help strengthen this beneficial connection for customers and communities. A regional Missouri-based initiative known as **BiodiverseCity St. Louis** (<http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/sustainability/sustainability/biodiversecity-st-louis/biomeatl.aspx>) may provide ideas and inspiration to help your IGC build business while doing good.

Creating a focused coalition

Like many urban areas, metropolitan St. Louis is often defined by its geopolitical boundaries, demographics and crime statistics. But the region that surrounds the city has a history of programs focused on nature-rich living and biodiversity. Even so, the assortment of programs historically led to fragmented results.

Sheila Voss, vice president of education at the **Missouri Botanical Garden (MBG)** (<http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/>), puts it this way: "There was a sense that there were a lot of parallel efforts that just weren't breaking through to be foremost in people's minds."



During the past two years, Gateway Arch National Park and the city of St. Louis office of sustainability have hosted The Great MonArch Migration Event in celebration of migrating monarch butterflies and National Public Lands Day. The photos included are from the 2017 event, which IGC Greenscape Gardens & Gifts participated in.

In 2012, that changed when about 30 organizations — ranging from independent garden centers to governmental agencies and nonprofits, including MBG — rallied around the idea of urban biodiversity. A regional coalition, BiodiverseCity St. Louis (BiodiverseCitySTL), was born, with a goal of working together to improve the region's quality of life through actions that protect, promote and enhance its biodiversity.

BiodiverseCitySTL now comprises more than 100 organizations working in increasingly collaborative ways to celebrate nature, influence policies and practices, and activate community change through projects as varied as invasive species removal to tree planting events and community gardens.

Voss emphasizes that nurseries and garden centers, "literally at the table" since the coalition's beginning, have been key partners of successful public events and action projects. "Retail centers that interact with people throughout the year can reinforce these concepts that every single person, at any scale, can make a difference," she says.

St. Louis-area garden center Sugar Creek Gardens became a BiodiverseCitySTL community partner about five years ago. For owner Abby Lapides, the move was a natural extension of the nursery and garden center's mission: Gardening to Grow ... Community, Environment and Yourself. "The changes BiodiverseCity is trying to promote will have positive, lasting effects on the region," she says. "We need to be proactive in preserving our ecosystems."



Greenscape Gardens & Gifts highlights its native plants and pollinator plants with conversational, customer-friendly signs. Photos courtesy of Jennifer Schamber

Finding nature in neighborhoods

One pivotal aspect of BiodiverseCitySTL's success has been helping citizens see their backyards, neighborhoods and the St. Louis region in new ways. The program's wide-reaching embrace provides a framework for viewing projects — from edible school gardens to backyard birding — as parts of a bigger whole that speaks directly to enhancing the region's diversity of plant and animal life and the quality of human life.

Through "Nature in our Neighborhoods" activities, citizens are urged to "find somewhere to love" in their own backyards or places where they live, learn, work, play or pray. Extensive print and digital materials suggest project possibilities, offer guides and resources, and list nurseries, garden centers and landscape designers to help citizens "beautify, biodiversity and better" their communities.

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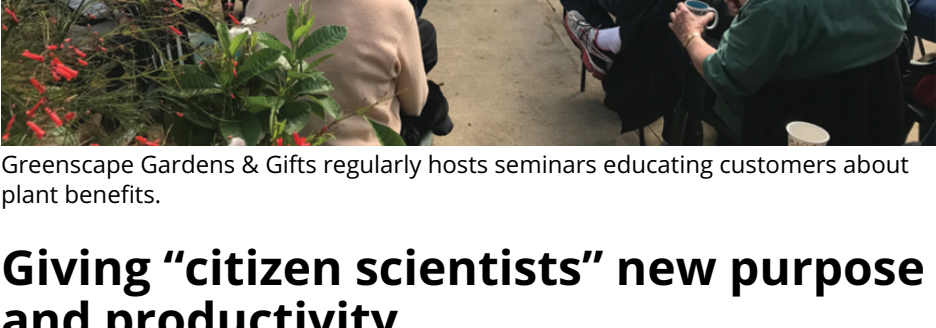
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Jennifer Schamber, general manager of BiodiverseCitySTL community partner Greenscape Gardens & Gifts, stresses that IGCs can help people make the nature connection. "Getting people to value it, whether through monarchs or migratory bird stories or turning it into a human health and wellness story, people make connections between what they do in their yard and how it affects the world around them," Schamber says.



Greenscape Gardens & Gifts regularly hosts seminars educating customers about plant benefits.

Giving "citizen scientists" new purpose and productivity

November 2018 marked the public launch of a new citizen science component of the St. Louis regional initiative. Known as BiomeSTL (Biodiversity Metropolitan St. Louis), the project's goal is to document the region's biodiversity through observations by average citizens to create an atlas and, ultimately, an action plan to guide policy and practices in ways that promote biodiversity and quality of life.

A map shown at the launch for this "living resource" emphasized natural connections over county lines. "The human-drawn lines are literally and figuratively faded in the background, because we want people to see the natural assets of our region and start to think of it as natural corridors and create an identity for themselves that they live in a nature-rich region," Voss says.

The project relies on a free, simple-to-use app called **iNaturalist** (<https://www.inaturalist.org/>) that any person (or IGC) can put to use for projects, big or small. All it takes is a smartphone and the desire to connect with the natural world.

As of Dec. 27, 2018, BiomeSTL's iNaturalist project page includes more than 38,000 non-casual observations from 3,027 observers documenting 3,666 plant and animal species in the St. Louis metropolitan area. Through iNaturalist.org, you can access the project — or information specific to your own community — and see the public results.

Schamber says that teachers are especially excited by this development, noting one school that is planting native echinacea species and echinacea cultivars to study pollinator preferences — and this was the school's own idea, without any suggestion from Schamber or others. Schools have really zeroed in on biodiversity, she says.

"The citizen science component is probably one of the most enticing things. The technology is now accessible to anyone to connect into this greater message," she says. "As a garden center, there's definitely been a tremendous increase in projects going in, especially in the schools. They're planting not just a plant, but an idea."

Milkweeds for Monarchs:

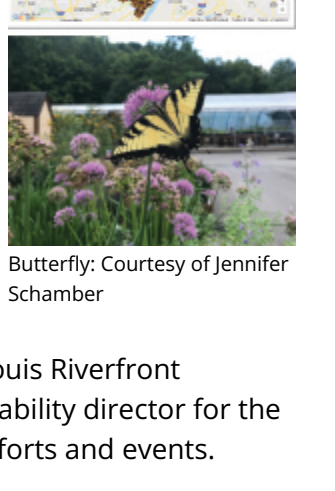
The St. Louis Butterfly Project (<https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/monarchs/>)

In 2014, the city of St. Louis launched an initiative to plant monarch habitats in response to the dwindling number of these iconic butterflies migrating through the region each year. In honor of the city's 250th anniversary, 50 monarch gardens were planted at public sites, such as fire departments and City Hall, and then-Mayor Francis Slay challenged the city's citizens to plant 200 additional monarch gardens.

As 2018 draws to a close, the city has more than 400 registered monarch gardens and a newly planted, 30-acre St. Louis Riverfront Butterfly Byway. Catherine Werner, sustainability director for the city, coordinates the on-going program's efforts and events.

"What's really heartwarming, if you look at the map and see where the gardens are located, you can see it really covers the entire footprint of the city of St. Louis," Werner says. "It's not something that's just appealing to a certain geographical area or demographic. It's really something that's engaging people all through the city — and clearly now providing impact because we have little bits of monarch habitat throughout the city of St. Louis."

Jennifer Schamber, general manager of St. Louis-area IGC Greenscape Gardens & Gifts, acknowledges the importance monarchs have played in this region that sits in the middle of the Midwest monarch migration path. "For many people, the monarch migration was the light-bulb moment," she says. "That has probably been the most influential story in this whole [biodiversity] movement — the monarch migration and the decreasing numbers."



Butterfly: Courtesy of Jennifer Schamber

Reinforcing the importance of regional results

National programs have an important role in promoting public awareness of biodiversity. As this issue goes to press, the National Pollinator Garden Network is poised to announce that the Million Pollinator Garden Challenge has reached its goal of one million pollinator gardens nationwide. But region-specific efforts have additional power to change backyards and entire communities.

In addition to being a BiodiverseCitySTL partner, the City of St. Louis has extensive biodiversity programs of its own, including nationally recognized monarch habitat initiatives. Sustainability Director Catherine Werner suggests the regional focus of programs, such as BiomeSTL and the city's Milkweeds for Monarchs, may be paramount to success. "It's for the people as much as the butterflies," Werner says. "This isn't just for environmental activists, it's for everyone. It's localized, tangible and personal."

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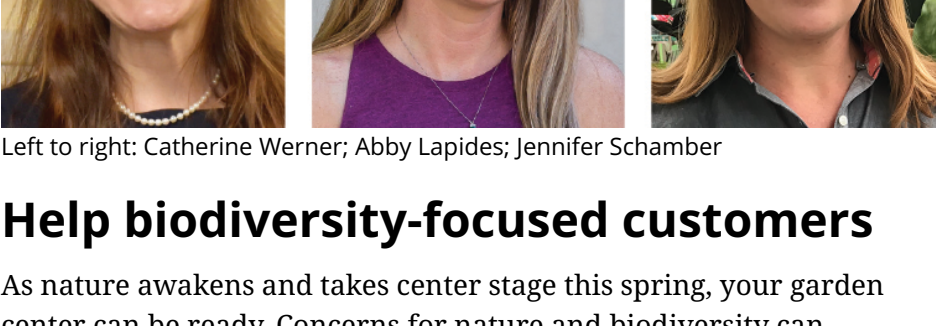
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Lapides agrees that regional focus is extremely important. "Though I think national organizations that are trying to sway policy are vital to conservation efforts, we need to start at home," she says. "When people see their friends or neighbors working on these initiatives or see tangible benefits locally, they become strong motivators to join in."



Left to right: Catherine Werner, Abby Lapides, Jennifer Schamber

Help biodiversity-focused customers

As nature awakens and takes center stage this spring, your garden center can be ready. Concerns for nature and biodiversity can transcend traditional gardening trends. Consumers want to be good stewards of nature, get involved, be informed, make purposeful plant and product choices — and shop at businesses that share their concerns.

"Projects like BiomeSTL or the Million Pollinator Garden Challenge, [these are the] greatest gifts our industry has ever been given, except maybe victory gardens — that was the last time we've seen something with such collective impact and call to action," Schamber says. "Make it really easy for people. Figure out those top 10 plants for pollinators and always keep those on hand."

She suggests partnering with local nature- or native-focused organizations, curating your plant offerings carefully, recruiting staff passionate about biodiversity, and educating customers. Greenscape's spring plans include BiomeSTL signage, citizen science seminars, and a small-scale iNaturalist project on their own property.

"Plants with purpose create people with a purpose and, all of a sudden, your business has a purpose," Schamber says. And purpose pays off in many ways.

The National Pollinator Garden network reports that 92 percent of garden centers have seen an increase in demand for pollinator-friendly plants and services since 2015, when the Million Pollinator Garden Challenge started. Initiatives like BiodiverseCitySTL and the City of St. Louis' Milkweeds for Monarchs program have impacted regional plant sales, as well.

"There has been a massive increase in demand for Missouri native perennials. I have seen efforts to save the monarchs become a gateway for new gardeners," Lapides says. "Once people see what sort of effect they can have just in their backyard, it opens up this idea that nature isn't just hidden away in our parks, but is everywhere and it needs to be nurtured."

Through BiodiverseCity St. Louis, coalition leaders have seen the impact that a garden center can have when the message of biodiversity is shared with intention. "I can't emphasize enough the role that they can play," Voss says. "By [selling plants] in such a way that connects it to something bigger, that really resonates with customers because it makes them feel really good about the plants that they're buying." Echoing that message can create demand and position your IGC with nature-loving customers and communities.